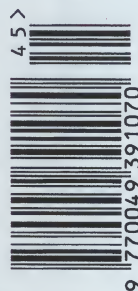


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'My life's
a real
f***in' mess!'



Radiohead

● **Exclusive** The years of gigging dangerously

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Thom Yorke

Role Sings and plays guitar.

What's he like 'Paranoid, that's me'. Actually very friendly if treated with a little respect. Hates clichés. Has an ongoing love/hate relationship with the modern world. Adores gadgets and the Internet, but hates having to rely on machines.

Interests Buddhism (casual); the lie of politics, techno music.

Typical quote 'For me, that Saturday [Diana's funeral] went much deeper than anyone thought. The whole TV show – George Michael strutting around like a peacock in church – meant nothing to me. But I started crying my eyes out when I saw the people who stopped their cars and lined the motorway. It was the first time that people in Britain actually thought, "Hang on... it's us; it's us against the media"... Actually that sounds horrible. It's more than that, it's not just the media. It's the Royal Family, it's the newspaper editors. Everyone was out of touch with the public.'



Radio da

It's hard to believe, but only four years ago no one *really* knew who Radiohead were. Now, with 'OK Computer' lodged firmly in the Top 20 and virtually no serious rivals, fame is something this extraordinary Oxford quintet are having to get used to. So what happened? And are they happy?

Interview **Peter Paphides** Photography **Tom Sheehan**

Thom Yorke doesn't remember the first time he saw someone walking down the street wearing a Radiohead T-shirt. But then, there's no particular reason why he should. After all, it was almost five years ago. 'What happened?' he asks. So I tell him about that sunny afternoon outside Georgina's coffee house in their native Oxford, when, on the other side of the arcade, a skinny young indie kid advanced towards us. I didn't see him immediately. The first I knew about it was when Thom and guitarist Jonny darted behind me and peered at their subject with a peculiar mix of fascination and glee. How very appropriate, I thought, that their new single should have been called 'Anyone Can Play Guitar', a wide-eyed paean to the delights of forming a band and watching things begin to happen around you. The chorus, one of Radiohead's most joyful, went: 'I want to be in a band when I get to heaven/ Anyone can play guitar and they won't be a nothing any more.'

One could, of course, get nostalgic about such simple times. Witness the frequency with which Paul McCartney reminisces about those old Buddy Holly covers he used to play with John in the Quarrymen. Rock stars have a habit of romanticising their pasts, but it's no accident that if you try playing a similar game with Radiohead's frontman, you'll get short shrift. 'To be honest, for the first two years of our career, I just felt like I had to find some way of proving that I meant it. The moment I thought our music justified our existence, everything changed. It was like someone had switched the lights on.'

Alone, at the back of the tour bus, in the heart of silent Strassbourg, Thom is an attentive bundle of nervous energy. The fans have gone home, but the adrenalin high of two hours spent tearing into most of 'The Bends' and the revelatory 'OK Computer' has yet to subside. You can always tell when Radiohead are buzzing: guitarist Ed clears three feet when he jumps into the chorus of 'Bones'; bassist Colin dances a rare pixie dance during the euphoric 'Airbag', and 'Lucky' (the song recorded in one day for War Child)... well, 'Lucky' just leaves you weeping like a baby: 'You enjoyed it tonight? Christ, you should have seen Brussels,' sighs Thom, unwrapping a sandwich.

This is as near as Thom gets to small talk. The rest of the time he's immersed in some other place—a trait which has led some commentators to deem him rude or standoffish. One senior employee at his record company recently told me how he found himself having dinner with Radiohead and some mutual friends in their entourage. Having never previously met Thom, said employee gingerly asked him if he minded him tagging along. 'Yes, I do actually,' deadpanned the singer, before easing into warm conversation. In other words, that's just his way. If

you're waiting for Thom Yorke to smile in order to gauge when he's happy, then you'd best cancel future appointments. As Kristin Hersh (one of Thom's heroines) once said, 'Happiness is as intense as any other emotion. And if that seems implausible, think about when you're fucking.'

So no smiles; no fanfares. And yet there's a self-assurance about Thom that didn't exist before 'The Bends' came out. Back at the coffee house in 1993, Thom's body language was like a mirror held up to the self-loathing of early songs like 'Thinking About You' and 'Prove Yourself'. His parting shot that afternoon was delivered with resignation rather than defiance: 'At the end of the day, we're a lily-livered excuse for a rock band. We may as well accept the truth and carry on.' This utterance he *does* remember, mainly because he lifted it word for word from a Radiohead review that appeared one week previously in *NME*: 'I actually sort of agreed with that comment,' he recalls, drawing his knees towards his chest. 'In fact, it was quite funny. But the picture they ran alongside it—that coloured everything we did for the next two years. The caption beneath it simply said "Thom gurns for a living". Well, I guess I must be quite sensitive, because that hurt me more than anything anyone wrote for a very long time afterwards.'

'American success is the weirdest. It's like being given really great drugs and not being told they have any side-effects.'

In the critical afterglow of 'OK Computer', it's sometimes easy to forget just how unfashionable Radiohead were. With Suede and Nirvana making all the right moves in the eyes of the British press, the angular fuzzpop of Radiohead's debut album, 'Pablo Honey', met with general bewilderment. Consolation, though, came with the news that over in Los Angeles, America's most influential radio station, KROQ, had just discovered 'Creep'. And when KROQ discovers a song, it's guaranteed to be a hit within two months. However, no American success comes without its price. The band who spent a year playing the same song across the TV studios and concert halls of America were a sorry sight by the end of 1993, but as early as their first LA trip, Thom's spirit was already weakening. I was with him on the day that one DJ—we'll call him Kevin—emotionally blackmailed him into singing a jingle for his show. The idea was that Thom would sing a segment of 'Creep' with the lyric altered to say that the show was 'so fucking special'. After two horrified refusals, Kevin tried a different tack: 'You did actually sing on that record, right?'

Thom: 'Of course I fucking did.'

Kevin: 'Well, how about it then?' Perhaps someone with the bullish self-belief of Oasis would have made a better job of it, but for Thom Yorke, these were painful times: 'American success is the weirdest thing,' he later confided. 'It's like being given these really great drugs and not being told they have any side-effects. It all went sour because we couldn't get rid of "Creep". We ►

Without whom none of this...

So 'OK Computer' is a bit of a classic. But where the hell did it come from?



REM FABLES OF THE RECONSTRUCTION

Thom on REM: 'It's such a confidence boost when one of your influences tells you they like your music.'

KRISTIN HERSH HIPS AND MAKERS

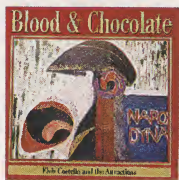
Solo acoustic set from the woman who fronted Rhode Island rockers Throwing Muses. Thom: 'Whenever I'm stuck, I listen to this. Happiness doesn't have to be an inane thing. It's just usually pictures you draw with words.'



JOHNNY CASH LIVE AT FOLSOM PRISON

'Exit Music' on 'OK Computer' came about from trying to get a similar sound to that album. I'd heard Johnny

Cash before, but I didn't really get it the first time around. Last year though, I really became immersed in him though.'



ELVIS COSTELLO BLOOD AND CHOCOLATE

Possibly the most easily spotted Radiohead influence, Elvis's angriest album finds many parallels in Thom's

more bilious lyrics Thom finally met Elvis Costello two years ago when Costello approached him at a festival. It turns out that Elvis had heard Thom on the radio singing his praises and felt compelled to thank him personally: 'When I was about 16,' recalls Thom, "'Blood And Chocolate" was the album that made me change the way I thought about recording and writing music, lyrics too. Everything about that record – even the way he got the artist to do the sleeve – is just awesome. Even the way he sang it so that he couldn't hear his voice on the headphones so that he'd really have to belt it out.' His "Tokyo Storm Warning" has a similar feel to "Electioneering". Almost rockabilly, you know?'



MIRACLE LEGION SURPRISE SURPRISE SURPRISE

Jangly Boston four-piece who emerged in the shadows of REM. Released five albums of lachrymose pop

brilliance, but never got the credit they deserved. You can hear a lot of Thom in the tearful, plangent tones of ML singer Mark Mulcahy, especially on the later 'Me And Mr Ray' album. 'They were a huge influence,' he admits, 'There's a song off "Surprise Surprise Surprise" called "All For The Best", which is just one of the purest things I've ever heard – that was my introduction really. For me, the only voice that's come close to Mark Mulcahy's is Tim Buckley's. I was so excited when Mark came to our Boston date. He's recorded a solo album, but he can't get a deal for it. Which is a fucking tragedy, because he's a genius.'



Jonny Greenwood

Role The guitar-abusing mad professor of Radiohead. Fancied by many; married to one.

What's he like Very funny; slightly baffled air never leaves him.

Interests He's currently listening to the audio book of Stephen Fry's 'Moab Is My Washpot': 'There's something very comforting about going to sleep listening to Stephen Fry's voice as you fall asleep in your bunk far away from home.'

Typical quote 'You know when you say goodbye to everyone in the room, and then you leave only to realise there's something you forgot to bring – so you have to go back? That's how I feel all the time.'

Also: [to Ed] 'What? You've never seen "Foghorn Leghorn"? Well, principally, it concerns a large hen...'

► had to milk it. And the rest of the album was never given a chance.' By the time Radiohead returned to Britain, all attempts to follow up The Hit had failed and the British record company – confident that a re-issued 'Creep' would provide Radiohead with their first Top Ten hit – insisted on a British release for the song. Hence the beleaguered quintet making their 'Top Of The Pops' debut with the song that they were now referring to as 'Crap'. At their Highbury Garage gig a fortnight previously, Thom was rounded upon by Kate Moss and her friends, all of them eager to profess their admiration. It's a scenario that was echoed last year when Thom and Jonny played a few numbers to an audience of 'aliens from another planet sent here to lower the standard' at the *Dazed And Confused* tenth anniversary bash. Of the latter, Thom remembers: 'It was quite good actually, because we'd just written "Exit Music", so I got to sing "We hope that you choke" at all these people.'

'Where do we go from here/The words are coming out all weird...'

How to unravel all this weirdness? After all, a mere year ago, those offhand remarks about Thom's looks had left him irredeemably bruised. Now Beautiful People were turning up to his gigs and claiming to empathise with Radiohead's music: 'I do feel intimidated by beauty, just as money and power can also be intimidating. I've always been curious to see what happens around people with that much power. I'd never seen that until I started doing this. All these big people want to meet you, and you don't know if you have anything to say to them.'

When you believe yourself to be ugly or worthless, it's hard to project anything beyond that. Often you don't even want to – after all, why attract attention to yourself when you've got so little to offer? As they went into the studio to record their second album, Radiohead looked like a band in the throes of a per-

sonal and professional confidence crisis. When I ask Thom what piece of advice he'd give to himself around this time, he stretches his skinny frame across the chair and grins, 'You know when you grow your hair long? Well, don't!' You can see his point. At this time, Thom's appearance – a bizarre bleach-blond heavy-metal barnet – told you everything you needed to know about Radiohead's self-confidence. They were paralysed with nerves. 'That would have been putting it mildly,' he concurs. Obviously we weren't sure about what we were doing. Plus around that time, Suede were ultra, ultra confident – and we were the spotty sixth-formers. But one of the few things that really kept me going were these letters that people wrote to me. I think a sense of panic overtook things. The songs I was writing were drunken consolation songs. It just seemed like there were a million ways we could go and the easiest one was into oblivion, never to return.'

When Thom speaks of 'The Bends' having 'a sense that we're waking up while we're doing it, that we're just coming out of something really terrible', it's there on songs like 'Bulletproof', 'Street Spirit' and 'Nice Dream'. The latter, he recalls, 'came out of some words I was singing when I was half-asleep, and when I get drunk or whatever, I usually find that I don't get hangovers. I just go into a sort of coma and come out, but my head goes round and round for hours. The lyric refers to a story by Kurt Vonnegut where this crystal has been found which turns all water completely solid, and someone decides to drop it into the sea.'

Such apocalyptic imagery seems entirely appropriate for a band who sensed their future being thrown into jeopardy. Sessions for 'The Bends' were fraught. According to Thom, 'there was no communication or faith in ourselves. It just felt like there was no point. Sitting in the studio thinking: No, I don't think we can get this together. We're just going to have to split up. It was less splitting up from each other, ►

Colin Greenwood

Role Stands behind the three guitarists nodding sagely as he plays his bass.

What's he like Extremely friendly, utterly sociable, rather maternal. Like out of 'Pathetic Sharks' Playful too. Once when Thom was absent from a soundcheck, Colin stepped forward and sang, 'I want ham rolls... with chips' to the tune of 'Lucky'.

Interests Reading; all kinds of music; looking for the perfect pair of trousers.

Typical conversation 'So, you want us to do "Killer Cars"? Is that your favourite? Aaah! It's great when you've got a favourite!'





Phil Selway

Role The band's pulse. During Radiohead's nightmare Glasto 97 slot, during which all the monitors and lights blew out, Thom says, 'Phil played the show of his life. That's what saved us'.

What's he like Attentive. He used to be a Samaritan.

Interests Parascending, apparently.

Typical conversation 'I can't believe no one's offered you a cup of tea. Milk? Sugar?'

► more "I don't wanna do this any more" in very big letters, and then, in smaller letters, "And I'm gonna go and buy a car and drive away. And I'm not coming back."

After one final argument over the song 'Sulk' – the rest of the band thought it should be recorded as a single; Thom disagreed – Radiohead agreed that they had worried themselves into a standstill. 'The Bends' was finally recorded in two weeks after a short tour, during which 'the word "FUN" emerged in our lives'. New songs had now been thrashed out and road-tested, and 'we realised how simple it is, once you stop dissecting it'.

More importantly, Thom's hair was short again. With the Demi Moore Rule Of Aesthetic Endeavour (the shorter your hair is, the better your work) singlehandedly turning around his group's fortunes, the pendulum was swinging firmly in Radiohead's direction: Britpop's chirpy triumphalism was beginning to wear thin; Michael Stipe heard 'The Bends' and declared, "Radiohead" are so good it frightens me", before inviting them to play on their 'Monster' tour; and (for what it's worth) 'Fake Plastic Trees' was immortalised in 'Clueless' as 'complaint rock'. On the day 'The Bends' was released, Radiohead played an incendiary show in Wolverhampton. Afterwards, Thom admitted, 'It's quite a head-fuck for the band to realise that you can get good reviews from making good music.'

'In an interstellar world/I am back to save the universe'

If 'The Bends' portrayed a band picking themselves off the floor and regaining some sense of orientation, 'OK Computer' shows them using their anxieties as fuel rather than as an obstacle – and in the process, dragging guitar music firmly into the twenty-first century. Five months after the album's release, Thom says he's surprised it hangs together so well.

That it does hang together, though, is mainly because of the sentiments expressed recurrently in his lyrics. Unsurprisingly, the word 'millennial' has been bandied about in connection with songs like 'Paranoid Android' and 'Let Down'. But if there is one thing that unites these songs, it's a lot more intimate than millennial psychosis. Common to almost all of Thom Yorke's lyrics is the sense of one's environment spiralling out of control. It was there in 'Planet Telex' and 'My Iron Lung'. And it radiates at the heart of 'The Tourist' and the idyllic UFO fantasy of 'Subterranean Homesick Alien'. 'Electioneering' was the result

of time spent reading 'The State We're In' – *Observer* editor Will Hutton's requiem for traditional left-right political polarisations – and Eric Hobsbawm's 'A Short History Of The Twentieth Century'. 'I was completely fucking ignorant until I read those books,' he enthuses, 'because I never did any history at school. And they're both amazing, because the thing you realise is that politicians have no control over anything. When I was a kid, I always used to think: If the Third World is in debt to the First World and the First World is also in debt, then where is this money that everyone's borrowing? And of course, it's with the oil barons. Do you know that if all the Third World countries who are in arrears refused to hand in their monthly payment to the West, then the entire global banking system would collapse?' This concluding flourish is delivered with a relish that suggests such an eventuality would be welcome.

Perhaps that shouldn't be such a surprise, though. There is much of the modern world that Radiohead-music has yet to come to terms with. Even given that cars have long been a source of anguish to the band (think 'Killer Cars' and 'Stupid Car'), 'Airbag' remains their eeriest driving song, injecting giddy redemption into lines like 'In a jack-knifed juggernaut/I am born again'. 'Nothing scares me more than driving,' he explains, 'I hate it. With a fucking passion. I hate it because it's the most dangerous thing you do in your life. And because driving up the M4, half the people have got their mobile phones on when they're driving. It's like you're forced to play fucking Russian Roulette every time you have to travel somewhere. Your average expensive fast German car gives you the idea that you can't die. And that's a fraud. Really, when you think about it, every time you get home, you should run down the street screaming "I'M BACK! I'M ALIVE!"'

Not a response you'd readily associate, perhaps, with the singer once tipped by *Melody Maker* to be the next Rock Suicide™ following Kurt and Richey. Radiohead aren't necessarily happier; life isn't *that* much easier. With the exception of Ed, who recently parted with his girlfriend of three years, and Colin, who has just bought a mobile phone in order to stay in touch with his new girlfriend in New York – the band's long-term relationships have remained intact. But there does seem to be an inner resolution borne of having weathered past crises; a sense that anything thrown at them is just absorbed and used as armour.

'After a few years of being away from home,' says Thom, 'you just end up being made of different stuff to most people. Creatively, that's also one of the benefits. But each band has to find their own way of staying sane. We've managed to fashion our own little cocoon, which is something that REM also did, which means that we're not relying on fads or the *Zeitgeist* in order to survive.'

Many bands rely on cocaine to hurry up the hours, but, says Thom, 'I can't bring myself to take a drug that people get killed for. Besides, the only people I've seen on it are just the dumbest fucking people on Earth. That's what we wrote "Paranoid Android" about. Sanity for us is sleeping on the tour bus and not staying in hotels. You feel a bit more of your

soul ebb away every time you check out of a hotel. But in periods of crisis and difficulty, you just fall back on the usual crutches. You end up drinking a lot.'

Is that healthy?

'It's inevitable. I read a quote somewhere from Bono who said that when U2 finish touring, he has to check himself in to the Dublin Clarendon and stay there for a week, because he doesn't want to inflict himself on his family. And I think that's true for all of us. You spend your first week at home feeling intensely restless, so you just get pissed every day.'

Is there a single biggest sacrifice that you've made in order to get to this point?

'Yeah,' comes the slightly impatient retort, 'my life's a real fucking mess. When I go home, I've got everything everywhere. I've got six years' worth of life to sort out and I never get to sort it out because I'm working. Having said that, it's stressful, but it's not impossible. Then a lovely, sleepy smile spreads across those boyish features. 'Some days you look at it and you think, "This is a mess, but it's okay."'

Is it? These days, when Thom Yorke talks about half-formed plans and potential directions for future records, he's not the glowering complaint rocker of 'Creep' infamy. There's a Thom Yorke who's just re-emerging after five years spent working out how to play this game: the playful art student who scanned the whole of the Cistine chapel on to a computer, changed the colours and managed to wangle a degree from Exeter Uni's computer-illiterate tutor; the 23-year-old who I saw spend an entire car journey trying to convince his bandmates to call the first album 'Unit' (as in, 'We shifted so many units'). As I get ready to leave, he's enthusing about the band's plans to hijack a secret marketing study conducted by the record company to see what kind of people buy Radiohead records: 'The marketing men won't let us get hold of it, though. They knew we were going to abuse it and make a T-shirt out of it.'

Although he'd never be so gauche as to tell you, Thom Yorke is actually enjoying himself. Now, when Radiohead perform 'Anyone Can Play Guitar', Thom sings 'I want to be in this band when I get to heaven.' Do you know what's really scary? He's just warming up. ●

Radiohead play Wembley Arena on Nov 1

Ed O'Brien

Role Getting so excited at the beginning of 'The Bends' that he has to walk over to the other end of the stage and back again in order to stop exploding. Oh, and guitar.

What's he like Congenial, eager to put you at ease.

Interests Running. Apparently he needs to strengthen his body in the next few years, in order to stop his back going funny.

Typical conversation 'Do you think we'll end up like one of those old 70s bands, doing cabaret versions of our old hits? I hope not. It's a frightening thought.'

